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**THE MEXICAN CHURCH: PROSPECTS
FOR INCREASED ACTIVISM**

1 DECEMBER 1986

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Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D C 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE**1 December 1986****The Mexican Church: Prospects for Increased Activism****Summary**

The Mexican Catholic Church continues to perform a stabilizing role in Mexico, but an increased willingness on the part of regional clerics to voice their concerns with government policy suggests greater activism is possible in the longer term. The overriding, and thus far, successful, goal of the Church hierarchy has been to maintain and increase its position within the country's power structure, primarily attempting to gain some influence on largely non-political issues while avoiding direct confrontation with the Mexican government. As a result, the real pressure for change has come from the somewhat-independent regional Church leaders in northern and southern Mexico. These regional clerics have used different tactics, but are, for the most part, pursuing similar social and political goals--particularly regarding the elimination of poverty, fraud, and corruption. [redacted]

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The opportunities for the Catholic Church to expand its influence have been enhanced by the changing social, political, and economic backdrop in Mexico. The church hierarchy has benefited from Mexico City's increased need for cohesion and will most likely attempt to translate continued support into advances in some non-political objectives, such as an end to the mandatory use of state-produced textbooks in private schools and greater government control of evangelical movements. At the same time, however, regional Church leaders are likely to continue testing the limits of allowable political activism [redacted]

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This memorandum was prepared [redacted] the Office of African and Latin American Analysis and [redacted] Political Instability Branch, Foreign Subversion Instability, Office of Global Issues. Information available as of 1 December was used in its preparation. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Mexico Branch, Middle America-Caribbean Division, [redacted]

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There is also a possibility--albeit remote--that the Church could adopt the more activist approach of the regional clerics and begin to oppose the government. As a means of projecting the likelihood that these clerics are harbingers of increased activism for the Mexican Church at large, we compared the situation in Mexico to that in the Philippines, where the Church emerged as a pivotal political actor prior to the fall of President Ferdinand Marcos. While this comparison reveals some similarities, we believe the differences are sufficient to make it unlikely that a Philippine-like situation could result in Mexico in the near term. Key indicators in the evolution of such a scenario would include a weakening of the Mexican government's authority, the emergence of a popular and powerful Church leader, or rampant human rights abuses.

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Introduction

The Mexican Catholic Church--a conservative institution in the Latin American context--has served as a stabilizing force in post-Revolutionary Mexico despite an increased willingness on the part of regional clerics to voice their concerns with government policy. Over the years, the modus vivendi between the Church--a generally low-key but pervasive presence in the country--and the officially and traditionally anti-clerical government has evolved to their mutual advantage. The Church, for its part, generally supports government policy and, behind-the-scenes, works to expand its influence despite the restricted latitude constitutionally granted it for activities. Mexico City, in turn, viewing the Church as a factor for social peace, is somewhat lax in enforcing the anti-clerical provisions of the Mexican Constitution, and provides access for the Catholic hierarchy to key government leaders.

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Playing the Political Game: A Coopted, Cautious Church Hierarchy

The overriding political goal of the Catholic Church in Mexico is to maintain and, if possible, increase its position within the country's power structure. In the view of the US Embassy, the image publicly conveyed at the 38th annual Mexican bishops conference last April was that of an institution hoping to assist the spiritual and physical well being of the Mexican citizenry, but dedicated to the strengthening of its own role in society. To increase its clout, however, the Church will have to find ways to overcome not only constitutional limitations, but also the generally anti-clerical nature of most Mexicans.

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The Church hierarchy's awareness of these constraints is reflected in its usually cautious and sometimes defensive behavior. [REDACTED] the head of Mexico's Catholic Church, Cardinal Corripio, said in early August that the Church would not seek media coverage for its housing efforts on behalf of last year's earthquake victims

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[REDACTED] Earlier this year, Geronimo Prigione, the Apostolic delegate in Mexico, stated categorically that church leaders are not participating in politics because their sole mission is to seek the common welfare through the teaching of the Gospel. Bishop Genaro Alamilla, spokesman for the Mexican Episcopal Conference, added that "the president should have no fear, the church is not meddling in politics."

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This non-confrontational approach appears to have at least some modest payoff for Mexico's Catholic leaders, who have been able to develop good working relations with government elites. Frequent consultations between government and clerical leaders allow the Church an indirect influence in national and local affairs. According to reliable Embassy sources, Cardinal Corripio meets every one to two weeks with Secretary of Government Manuel Bartlett, and meetings between Corripio or Prigione and President Miguel de la Madrid have been arranged on short notice. Such access--both in this and previous administrations--appears to constitute a reward and encouragement for continuing Church support for the government. Such support has apparently won some other dividends. [redacted] as a result of the hierarchy's willingness to preach against civil unrest, the government is allowing the Church an unusually free hand in community programs. Because of Mexico's strong anti-clerical tradition, however, such arrangements go unacknowledged by both sides. [redacted]

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Within the narrow limits tolerated by the government, the Church hierarchy does engage in protests advocating social goals, in large part as a way of maintaining credibility with the people. While Church spokesmen occasionally address issues relating to government performance in meeting citizens' socioeconomic needs or encouraging respect for the vote, they often delay their remarks and avoid directly faulting the government. [redacted]

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[redacted] According to the Embassy, the Church's slow reaction minimized the risk of government retaliation, but advocacy in favor of still displaced victims preserved the credibility of the Church. [redacted]

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The Regional Churches--Breaking the Rules

Although the Catholic hierarchy remains a stabilizing force willing to play within the confines of the Mexican system, the somewhat-independent regional Church leaders in northern and southern Mexico have shown an increased willingness to break the rules of the game and press the government for genuine political and social reforms. Although pursuing similar goals, particularly regarding the elimination of fraud and corruption, clerical leaders in the north and south have followed differing paths, reflecting the divergent political constituencies indigenous to the two regions. Church leaders in the north follow a more conservative ideological perspective, while in the south a more liberal view is espoused. [redacted]

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Northern Church leaders demonstrated their determination to press for an end to electoral fraud in the aftermath of the July elections in Chihuahua. The reaction of the Catholic Church in Chihuahua to the alleged fraud was quick in coming and even stronger than expected, according to the Embassy. The Bishop of Juarez called for an invalidation of the elections within one week, while Chihuahua's Archbishop Adalberto Almeida y Merino ordered a cancellation of masses to protest the irregularities, according to press reports. The proposed church "strike" was only halted after papal intervention. [redacted]

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In the more impoverished south, Church leaders have also protested electoral fraud but have shown an equal--if not greater--concern for the social welfare of their

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constituents. In mid-1985, the southern bishops released a document entitled "The Gospel and Worldly Goods", which instructs the wealthy on social obligations. In their paper, the bishops observe the tremendous inequalities in income distribution in the region and the increases in poverty, leading them to conclude--among other things--that the function of property is not just personal, but communal. Bishop Samuel Ruiz of Chiapas, a key leader in the southern Church and a proponent of social change, is a frequent critic of the government. In August 1985, he dedicated a mass to the 514 people declared missing in Mexico for political reasons since 1979, according to press reports. The bishop described as "incomprehensible" the fact that in Mexico, "those who defend their ideology should be repressed." These concerns, focusing heavily on income redistribution and human rights, fuel anxiety within the Church hierarchy that the theology of liberation might be making inroads in southern communities. [redacted]

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Although the Church refrains from allying itself with political parties, regional clergy actions in both the north and south often lead to these charges which account for part of the government's concern. In the northern stronghold of the opposition National Action Party (PAN), clerical activities against voter fraud have fueled accusations that the Church supports the conservative party. Furthermore, an academic authority on the Mexican Church notes that the northern Catholic leadership reflects the region's adherence to democracy, as well as an alliance with business, a disdain for clerical support for Marxist doctrine, and a basic acceptance of capitalism. According to the same source, this contrasts with the leadership in the south where building socialism, the concept of a "people's church", and the notion of justifiable violence to pursue social goals are accepted. This has led on occasion, to the identification of southern clerics with opposition leftist parties. [redacted]

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Additional Opportunities for A Greater Role

The opportunities for the Catholic Church to expand its influence have been enhanced by changing social, political, and economic circumstances in Mexico. The mainstream hierarchy has benefited from Mexico City's increased need for support as the strains from protests of electoral fraud, a troubled economy, and a growing population have placed additional burdens on the system. In our view, the Church hierarchy will most likely attempt to translate continued support for the government into advances in some non-political objectives, such as an end to the mandatory use of state-produced textbooks in private schools and greater government control of evangelical movements. Nevertheless, regional clerics, who are less concerned with following the rules of the game, are just as likely to use any perceived opportunity to speak out against government shortcomings and increase their credibility with the people. [redacted]

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Numerous factors are pushing the Church, both at the national and regional levels, in the direction of increased activism:

- We believe the 1979 papal visit first paved the way for greater activism in the Church. During the visit, the clergy violated constitutional prohibitions against displaying religious flags, wearing clerical dress, and celebrating mass outdoors with little or no repudiation from the government. The large crowds that supported the event somewhat emboldened the Church, according to academic sources.

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- [REDACTED]
- The Church also is being driven by the need to act to counteract growing Protestant Evangelical movements. The 1986 Mexican National Catholic Bishops Conference stated that the proliferation of Protestant places of worship at the expense of Catholic Church membership represented a threat.
 - The role of the Church is growing from its ability to fill a void caused by the troubled state of Mexico's economy. The Catholic hierarchy provides for the poor through a prolific network of food distribution programs and parochial base communities, reported to number as many as 60-80,000. The role of the Church is also growing in education because the government cannot provide sufficient teachers, according to academic sources.
 - In addition, the Church hierarchy is increasingly nervous about the possibility of mass support for the Marxist-inspired theology of liberation, although large-scale support has not yet materialized. The Church is prompted by a desire to avoid conflict between supporters of traditional Catholic beliefs and those that view Marxism and Christianity as compatible. [REDACTED]

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Lessons From The Philippines

As a means of projecting the likelihood that these clerics are harbingers of increased activism for the Mexican Church at large, we compare the situation in Mexico to that in the Philippines, where the Church emerged as a pivotal political actor prior to the fall of President Marcos. An examination of the role of the Catholic Church in Mexico and the Philippines highlights similarities which suggest that some elements of the Mexican clergy may have entered the same road to political activism as the Philippine Church began travelling some 15 years ago. For example, both Churches exist in countries with high nominal Catholic populations: 85 percent in the Philippines and 93 percent in Mexico. [REDACTED]

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A fringe element also existed (and continues) in the Philippine Church and pressed for greater activism. The Christians for National Liberation, a leftist group formed by the Communists to gain support, sought to increase the Church's role in politics by radicalizing parishioners and thereby attempting to influence the more conservative hierarchy. The mainstream Mexican hierarchy faces similar, though significantly more fledgling, pressures from regional Church leaders desiring a more confrontational approach. [REDACTED]

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Furthermore, the Philippine Church's development of a political role was gradual, and its opposition to the government increased slowly. The Church hierarchy originally preferred to work within the system and was considered apolitical by most observers. Even after President Marcos imposed martial law in 1972, the Church remained quiescent for a time--hoping that life would improve under the new statutes. Likewise, the Mexican hierarchy prefers its working arrangement with government leaders and only within the past

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year have some clerics on the periphery engaged in criticism of Mexico City. In the Philippines, however, this attitude eventually gave way to increased activism [REDACTED] and the clerics concluded a new approach was needed to restore social order. By 1986, the Philippine Church had come full circle. It became a pivotal player in Marcos' downfall when Cardinal Sin broadcast an appeal calling the people to join non-violent protests and support the rebellious military officers backing Corazon Aquino. [REDACTED]

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Despite some similarities, numerous differences between the Mexican and Philippine situations will work to constrain the Mexican Catholic Church from a more activist course. A key element is an underlying current of distrust among Mexicans for the clergy. The Mexican Revolution was, in part, an anti-clerical revolution, and concerns over Church involvement in politics continue to linger in many segments of society. [REDACTED]

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The specific political backdrop in the Philippines also provided more opportunities than currently exist in Mexico:

--In the Philippines, the Church took a leading role, but it was also part of a larger movement opposing the Marcos regime. Political opposition exists in Mexico, but there is no national opposition party with broad-based support for the Church to attach itself.

--Issues that galvanized public discontent in the Philippines, [REDACTED] have been avoided--for the most part--in Mexico.

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--The Philippine Church, and other regime opponents, sensed a weakness in the government already beleaguered by a communist insurgency. The Mexican government continues to demonstrate control and is not challenged by an armed insurgency.

--Marcos' long stay in power ultimately placed the responsibility for most problems at his door. Mexico installs a new president every six years, increasing the hope for reform under each new leader. The transition of power also allows the focus of blame for problems to rest on previous administrations.

--The Philippine government lacked constitutional provisions that would allow a crackdown on the Church. In Mexico, the constitution contains specific provisions against Church involvement in politics, which, if fully enforced, could effectively silence the Catholic hierarchy.

--The Philippine Church also had a popular and powerful leader in Cardinal Sin. No such figure has emerged in the Mexican Church. [REDACTED]

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Finally, it should be noted that the Vatican has pursued a cautious approach in both cases; but, in the Philippines, the Church could no longer accept such a role and moved ahead without direct guidance from the Holy See. At this time, the Vatican also appears satisfied with the Mexican Church's relative freedom, despite the absence of official

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government recognition, and the Church hierarchy in Mexico City agrees with the cautious approach to reform and avoidance of political issues. We believe that perhaps as a result of the Philippine experience, the Vatican may be keeping a watchful eye on the Mexican situation to ensure that the Church does not become too active in political affairs. The Pope seemed to suggest this position when he overruled the Chihuahua bishop's plan to cancel masses in protest of election fraud. [redacted]

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Prospects for Increased Activism

In our judgment, the challenges facing the Mexican government in the next several years will probably allow the Catholic hierarchy to continue its non-confrontational approach in return for non-political rewards. These rewards might include concessions from the government on social issues, education policy, and anti-clerical restrictions. The Church appears satisfied to maintain access to Mexico's leaders and continue its modest gains in influence in exchange for its overall support for the government. [redacted]

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At the same time, regional Church leaders are likely to continue testing the limits of allowable political activism and, in the process, may occasionally violate the rules of the game. During the Episcopal Conference in early November, some clerical leaders continued to call for political reforms, [redacted] amid the traditional concerns of maintaining quality standards of education. According to press reports, the bishop of Ciudad Juarez expressed concern over the lack of political diversity in Mexico, [redacted]

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The mainstream hierarchy--with Vatican support--will likely be able to maintain control over the regional clerics in the near term, however, as demonstrated by the Church's control in Chihuahua. [redacted]

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The Church hierarchy can use its authority to control clerics, by transferring them, if necessary. A few priests in northern Mexico, for example, are reluctant to voice opposition to the policies of their archbishop as they fear they could be "exiled" to the small communities high in the Sierras, [redacted]

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Should the Church hierarchy fail to control rebellious clerics, we believe the government will not hesitate to do so. Reiterating the government's position in a speech prior to elections earlier this year, de la Madrid warned, "We are not going to permit the interference of the Church in political affairs", implying that Church activism could lead to enforcement of the anti-clerical provisions in the constitution. In addition, the government is already investigating some regional clerics. [redacted]

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Alternatively, there is a possibility--albeit remote--that the mainstream Church could adopt the confrontational approach of the regional clerics and begin to oppose the government directly. Drawing upon the Philippine example, however, we believe conditions in Mexico would have to change substantially for such a scenario to occur. Key indicators in the evolution of such a scenario would include a weakening of the Mexico City's authority, the emergence of a popular and powerful church leader, or rampant human rights abuses. Such possibilities are considered unlikely now, but could serve as precursors to increased activism were they to develop. Nevertheless, increased Church opposition alone would not be sufficient to topple the government, but it would add to the strains Mexico City is facing.

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